

Chapter 5

Leading for Love, Life, Wisdom, and Voice in Steiner Schools: Constraints and Conditions of Possibility



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Abstract This chapter interweaves two stories: the first is the story of Steiner education as one important voice in keeping focus on what matters in education and its transformative promise through the core pedagogical values of love, life, wisdom, and voice. The second story is based on the author's autoethnographical research on leading practices of Steiner school principals over a period of major change and crisis in a Steiner school's life. This research included the use of the theory of practice architectures to uncover unsustainable contradictions in the way we work in Steiner schools which constrain the full promise of the educational approach as an engine room for social change and renewal. These contradictions include doubt and uncertainty about the role of the principal and of leadership itself; and the depth of the emotional load of the principal and teachers in holding the competing ideological and pedagogical tensions of the Steiner and broader educational policy environment. Maintaining the integrity of the higher purposes of Steiner education involves leading practices which move away from the unsustainable tensions to encompass intentional hierarchy and healthy collaboration, and a repositioning of Steiner education from the margins to a legitimate part of a diverse educational mainstream.

Keywords Pedagogical values · Leading practices · Steiner education · Theory of practice architectures

Introduction

There was energy and excitement in the Australian Steiner primary school where I was principal way back in 2007 as we collectively embraced the pedagogical values of *love, life, wisdom*, and *voice* into our everyday practice. These values, which now

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underpin the ACARA¹—recognised Australian Steiner Curriculum,² are truly a call to action for all who aspire to educate children and offer hope for a revitalisation of what matters in education. I experienced joy leading within this shared understanding. It began, however, to unravel as a series of critical events almost brought the school to its knees. Such was the extent of the effect of those events on my very being, I was compelled to complete a doctoral study on my lived experience to get to the heart of the nature of leading practices in Steiner schools.

This chapter combines two interrelated stories embedded in the above. The first is the story of Steiner education³ as one important voice in keeping focus on what matters in education and the transformative possibilities through pedagogical values of love, life, wisdom, and voice. The second story is based on my autoethnographical doctoral research on leading practices of Steiner school principals, which included the use of the theory of practice architectures to uncover what is enabling and constraining the full potential of the educational approach. What is revealed in the telling of these stories is the force and reach of the ‘systems world’ (Habermas & McCarthy, 1985), into alternative educational contexts and the urgent call to deeply understand our conditions to transform them (Mahon, 2014).

I firstly provide some context on Steiner schools and my role as Steiner school principal. This is followed by a dialogue between two theoretical frames I used in my research: Steiner epistemology (Steiner, 1894/1964) and the theory of practice architectures (Kemmis et al., 2014). This dialogue reveals a rich imaginary of educational purpose. I then provide ‘substance and form’ (Mahon et al., 2020, p. 166) to this educational purpose which finds expression in the core pedagogical values mentioned above and which, I argue, can be realised in everyday practice in schools, not just Steiner schools.

Constraints and enablers of bringing substance and form (Mahon et al., 2020) to those inspiring pedagogical values—love, life, wisdom, and voice—are then discussed, with a focus on my research on leading practices of Steiner school principals. My study reveals the way we work together is an important part of an education which enables agency, health, and well-being for students, teachers, leaders in formal positions, and all members of a school community towards individual and collective renewal and pedagogical creativity. Two significant constraints in the Steiner context are highlighted, namely the extent of doubt and uncertainty not only about the principal role in a school, but about leadership itself, and the depth of the emotional load of the principal and teachers in navigating competing ideological and pedagogical tensions of the Steiner and broader educational policy environment.

¹ Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) was established by the Australian Labour Government in 2010 to develop a national curriculum—as part of the government’s ‘Education Revolution’.

² For more detail on the Australian Steiner Curriculum and the process of recognition with ACARA see <https://www.steinereducation.edu.au/curriculum/steiner-curriculum/>.

³ In this chapter I use the terms ‘Steiner’ and ‘Waldorf’ interchangeably. In Australia, some schools are called Waldorf Schools but most are called Steiner Schools. Some schools choose to take on the name of the first school in 1919 which started for the children of the factory workers at the Waldorf-Astoria factory in Stuttgart.

The interweaving stories may resonate for other contexts, other lives, as together we confront the reality that our current educational model, including the way we work, is failing to meet this time of ‘multiple, nested, global crises’ (Kaukko et al., 2021a, 2021b, p. 1): a climate catastrophe, destroyed ecosystems, ongoing pandemic threats, the impact of growing artificial intelligence, a youth mental health crisis, and increasing economic and social inequalities. What a world we are handing to our young people.

Background

I was a primary Steiner school principal from 2007 to 2016. This was part of a shift towards establishing school principals in Steiner school settings in the Australian context; this shift has occurred over time to meet contemporary realities of increased regulatory and compliance-driven demands within the global context and a focus on competition, high stakes testing, choice, and standardisation (Sahlberg, 2016). Establishing principals is at odds with traditional Steiner organisational models, where teachers have a large part in running schools, reflecting the educational and social renewal ideals of Steiner’s world view. I had been at the school since 1995 and had enjoyed various teaching roles; I gradually became more involved in both administrative and pedagogical aspects—as a member of the college of teachers⁴, and also as part-time education administrator (serving the college of teachers) in areas of school registration, compliance, and policy development. After an administrative review in 2006, I became Education Director, in effect the principal in all but name, and then officially school principal in 2011. I was one of the first principals in Australian Steiner schools, most of which at the time were run by the college of teachers.

The formal positional role of education director/principal made sense considering the Australian Labour Government’s ‘Education Revolution’ commencing in 2007, which was more of a structural revolution (Vandenberg, 2018). The government was, in effect, ushering in a new era of transparency, accountability, and a subtle change from ‘government to governance’ (Lingard et al., 2017, p. 7). This was through the establishment of a national curriculum, national testing, and transparency to parents through the publication of school data such as performance on national tests. The Steiner primary school was not immune to this, and the school board responded with its own structural changes to meet increasing complexities of accountability.

As principal, however, I deeply experienced the pull of practice traditions which persisted from the first Waldorf School in Stuttgart in 1919: an enduring culture of non-hierarchy and the language of consensus; the power of the ideal of the college

⁴ The college of teachers in a Steiner school has, over time, taken on various roles in Steiner schools and there is no one ‘form’ or function. It can be seen as the spiritual heart of the school, a collective group leading the pedagogical direction, or a collective school management body. It is, no matter what form, a powerful practice tradition in Steiner schools.

of teachers; and the authority of Steiner's texts themselves. Steiner's copious writings gave indications for the methodology and content of the curriculum of the first Waldorf school, but has become fixed and rigid over time—the opposite of the pedagogical creativity Steiner desired in his teachers in the first school. Against this broad backdrop, the teachers' sayings, doings, and relatings in my Steiner school context were bundled up in the complexities of their projects and dispositions: teachers with long tenure used to having strong say in all aspects of school life; the significant authority of the college of teachers given by teachers and many parents due to this body's depth of anthroposophical⁵ knowledge; and the ambivalence I experienced from teachers in giving authority to me in my formal role as principal. I realise I was caught in the crossfire of an ideological divide—between Steiner ideals and ever-increasing regulatory and compliance-driven demands—which was akin to doing the splits. Further in this chapter I detail the consequences of living this divide for bringing Steiner pedagogical values to everyday practice, as the school became subsumed by a series of crises.

This chapter now turns to providing a deeper context, as a backdrop to bring into form the humanistic, ecological values of Steiner education and pedagogy so needed for our times. This deeper context is enabled through a dialogue between the theory of practice architectures and Steiner epistemology to penetrate the question we have collectively lost the ability to ask: education for what purpose?

Getting to the Nature of Education Itself: Dialogue Between Theory of Practice Architectures and Steiner Philosophy

The theory of practice architectures is a contemporary account of social reality that focuses on practice (Mahon & Galloway, 2017). Individual and collective practices are shaped by practice architectures, which are the enabling and constraining preconditions for the conduct of practices. These architectures take form in: *cultural–discursive arrangements* which enable and constrain sayings; *material–economic arrangements*, which enable and constrain doings; and *social–political arrangements* which enable and constrain relatings of the practice (Kemmis, 2018). The underlying impulse and purpose of the theory was to provide a practical understanding of agency within the deepening ill-effects of neo-liberalism, social injustices, and unsustainable living (Kemmis & Mahon, 2017). This, in turn, was informed by an Aristotelean and Marxist orientation (Mahon & Galloway, 2017).

Of significance to my research was the theory of practice architectures standing apart from other practice theories, due to the moral dimension of *educational praxis* underpinning it. Drawing on an Aristotelean perspective, praxis is viewed as 'action

⁵ Anthroposophy means love of wisdom of humanity (anthro = human; sophia = wisdom). Steiner's philosophy aimed to contribute to the wisdom of humanity. Steiner pedagogy is built on anthroposophical principles that aim to connect the spiritual in the human being with the spiritual in the universe.

that is morally committed, and oriented and informed by traditions in a field' (Kemmis & Smith, 2008, p. 4), and, in a Marxist sense, it can be understood as history-making action, with social and ethical implications for emancipation (Kemmis et al., 2014). Emancipation or agency is possible since individuals and communities are both products and producers of history within the Marxist 'historical materialism' perspective. Both perspectives work together to ground the praxis-based educational theory in the development of a young person's agency towards 'the good for each person and the good for humankind' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 26).

This deeply resonates with Rudolf Steiner's vision of educating children to become healthy, purposeful, and creative adults who can do the good of fostering a healthy, just society. Steiner saw education and schools as the catalyst and engine room for social change and renewal. The social renewal ideal is an imagination for both moral and social development that lives in human freedom, not the imperatives of the state or any religious or scientific materialism (Lamb, 2010). It is this notion of freedom from political or economic interests which is paramount to fostering the human spirit⁶ in young people:

The question should not be: What does a human being need to know and be able to do for the existing social order? but rather: What capacities are latent in this human being, and what lies within that can be developed? Then it will be possible to bring ever new forces into the social order from the rising generations...The rising generation should not be moulded into what the existing social order chooses to make it (Steiner, 1919/1999, p. 71)

Both world views, then, promise a form of self-realisation, balancing collective good and individual expression and self-realisation. Steiner education provides a deepening of this perspective through its well-developed articulation of freedom. For Steiner, to be free is to be capable of thinking one's own thoughts, not merely of the body or of society, but thoughts which are generated by one's deepest, most original, most essential, and spiritual self, one's individuality. This inner freedom does not simply arise but comes about through an education that engenders it (Oberski, 2011). Such an education balances 'not only our thinking but our senses, feelings and our will as well' (Haralambous, 2018, p. 12) and grows an individual's moral capacity to impart purpose and direction to their lives out of free will. This, in turn, has implications for the renewal of society itself, as societal change and individual (spiritual) development are the twin pillars of our social future. In Steiner's view, a free action is connected to world need, and the individual is thus a potential co-creator of an ever-evolving universe (Wolfson, 2013).

Underpinning both Steiner educational philosophy and the theory of practice architectures is the relationship of the learner to practice. This relationship is 'coming to know how to go on in practices' (Kemmis, 2021, p. 3), not just participation in practice, but one of agentially doing things differently for a higher moral purpose. As embedded in the quote from Rudolf Steiner above, there is both a predetermined and emergent nature of practices with acknowledgement of 'individually unique

⁶ Steiner relates 'spirit' to thinking, agency and the 'higher self'. Education thus enables spirit development in young people to enhance moral strength, sharpen faculties of perception and extend thinking capacity and powers of discernment.

contributions... at the interface of social and individual levels of human life and development' (Stetsenko, 2020, p. 10). Within such a view of education, learning is imagined as open-ended, with a focus on a young person's indefinite future rather than striving for pre-defined goals in terms of fixed categories of knowledge (Tjarnstig & Mansikka, 2021).

Further, within an ecological systems frame (Capra, 2015), both worldviews see individual growth, development, and well-being as inseparable from the growth, development, health, and well-being of the whole community and planet. The theory of practice architectures deepens the picture. Distinctive practices of educational leadership, professional learning, teaching, and learning, student social and academic practice, and education policy and administration have also been empirically established as living entities that exist in ecological relationships with one another—as ecologies of practices (Kemmis et al., 2012). There are implications for the way we work as either enabling or constraining ecological health itself, if we also view ecological and leading practices as interconnected (Woods, 2020).

As part of a complex, living web, contemporary education policy can be thus implicated as part of the problem, with its relentless focus on competition, standardisation, 'back to basics' mantra, and high stakes testing within a limiting view of 'intelligence' and success in life that is purely related to the needs of the economy (Lupton & Hayes, 2021). Leading practices need to support a reconnection with core educational purpose to enable a community to move away from such a dominant, economically driven discourse.

For Steiner educators, purpose comes to living form through a dynamic pedagogy of love, life, wisdom, and voice (Gidley, 2016) and it is leading for and through these pedagogical values which can provide the enabling conditions for people to 'live well in a world worth living in' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 25). As noted above, Steiner education is a practical, living example of bringing substance to form (Mahon et al., 2020), but is not without its own challenges. Building on the brief introduction above, the next section goes deeper into an educational approach which began in Stuttgart in 1919 and can now be considered a post-formal education (Gidley, 2016) appropriate to prepare young people for post-normal times.⁷

A Post-formal Education

Post-formal pedagogy aims to engender in young people intuitive, holistic, integral thinking as a stage beyond Piaget's highest level of cognitive development—formal operations (Rawson, 2021, p. 61). Gidley (2016) proposes that Steiner pedagogy can be placed within educational movements which embody post-formal reason as key pedagogical goals: wisdom education (Sternberg, 2019); spirituality in education

⁷ Post-normal times have been characterised by 'heightened interconnectivity, complexity, chaos, and contradictions, and perhaps most acutely exemplified by the current climate crisis' (Porter, 2021, p. 67).

(De Souza, 2016); holistic education (Caldwell et al., 2011; Miller, 2019; Nielsen, 2006); complexity in education (Wheatley, 2017); and environmental, ecological and sustainability education (Jardine, 1998).

In her research, Gidley (2007, 2016) positioned Steiner education within a growing alternative academy. In this space, deconstruction of Steiner education was possible—away from its essentialist tendencies, and teachers’ craft knowledge—moving towards a renewal for the twenty-first century through the pedagogical values of love, life, wisdom, and voice. The next section begins weaving together my story of leading practices of Steiner principals with an exploration of Gidley’s work.

A Revitalisation of What Matters in Education: Love, Life, Wisdom, and Voice

In the search for truth the only passion that must not be discarded is love. That is the mission of truth: to become the object of increasing love and care and devotion on our part (Steiner, 1930/1983, pp. 37–38)

Gidley was appointed as a research advisor in the writing of the ACARA⁸—recognised Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework (Steiner Education Australia, 2011). Her theorisation of the four pedagogical values that underpin her post-formal education philosophy (Gidley, 2016, p. 181) was integrated into the design of the Steiner curriculum itself. My excitement as a principal entering into this unknown territory only grew with Gidley’s visit to the school to facilitate professional learning on ‘deconstructing and reconstructing Steiner’. This was a wonderfully irreverent title that was created by her as a provocation and spoke to my own mood for ‘disrupting’.

In the workshop sessions, Gidley postulated possibilities of Steiner education for today’s world and the future. She questioned the rigid adherence to methods and even content of the Steiner curriculum, and put to teachers that it is the processes and general indications of Steiner education which are as relevant now as they were when he created his philosophy. Teachers worked with Gidley on unpacking the themes central to a caring, revitalised, and wise education, and, from deep reflection on the underlying pedagogical principles of love, life (living thinking), wisdom, and voice—theorised from Gidley’s research—the school’s core values of *connection*, *imagination*, and *initiative* evolved. This formed the basis of critical reflection on and questioning of traditional teaching practices and further collective work on the school’s strategic direction. It was an enriching, transformative experience with a new relationship to purpose and accountability to our community (Mahon et al., 2020).

A more authentic ‘transformation’ narrative within a post-formal environment must involve such ‘*education-led ways of integrating different evidence in practice*’

⁸ Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority was established in 2010. The Australian Steiner Curriculum Framework was recognised by ACARA as an alternative to the Australian Curriculum in 2012. It is the only government recognised Steiner curriculum in the world.

(McKnight & Morgan, 2020, p. 653, my emphasis). Such inquiry breaks free of the practice architectures privileging an industrial model of education, towards equipping young people with capacities needed to make sense of past complexities, the current chaotic states, and future contradictions (Sardar, 2015). From a Steiner perspective, young people need to be empowered (within a narrative of hope for the future) to embrace paradoxes inherent in chaos and complexity, and place them at the service of growing wisdom; to re-vision solutions and create new narratives in response to multiple challenges of post-normal times (Gidley, 2010).

The pedagogical values of love, life, wisdom, and voice (Gidley, 2016), as they manifest in dynamic interaction in Steiner education as an integral, holistic education, are a gateway for such practices. Firstly, Steiner education supports a pedagogy of love as an evolutionary force. Steiner's picture also encompasses and resonates with Wilkinson and Kauko (2020) who argue that pedagogical love is the one value missing in education today. As an evolutionary and emergent force, pedagogical love is seen in: the care and compassion for the whole child; the integration of head and heart in teaching and learning; the long-term relationship between teacher and child; the developing in children a connection to self, others, and the world; and as a form of 'devotional attention to their well-being' (Kauko, Wilkinson et al., 2021a, 2021b, p. 2).

Love is also an evolutionary force for teachers and leaders who operate at an integral mind level (Wilber, 2000)—a fluid state of thinking, embracing difference, having courage for a higher purpose and where love, not judgement, is the key driver of actions. In this frame, we can understand education as an emergent phenomenon (Osberg & Biesta, 2021). If education is a 'coherent, affective entity in its own right: one that does not serve a pre-existing (external) purpose but which self-generates the purpose it serves' (Osberg & Biesta, 2021, p. 67), we can imagine into an undefined *form of care* for the future. This is not a predetermined 'good' future, but a yet unknowable future. It is through the unpredictable interaction between knowledge, the individual, and collective living that education can address this impossibility (Osberg & Biesta, 2021).

Secondly, the significance of a pedagogy of life as a sustaining force is found in the prime focus on the development of imaginative capacity in the primary years which is the foundation of living, mobile thinking. The focus on ecological awareness, process, movement, and discovery also lays the groundwork for bringing learning to life. Cultivating imagination involves students actively engaging with many kinds of artistic and problem-solving activities. Several modalities are used such as experimentation, creative writing, speech, drama, movement, music, drawing, painting, modelling, and sculpture. For Steiner, thinking is alive, and an active spiritual experience. It is also important for teachers to develop this capacity. The teachers' own capacities in the phenomenology of thinking, through meditative practice as another way of knowing, enable penetration into the nature of a child's development.

Third, the pedagogical value of wisdom as a creative force is enacted through the focus on multi-modal learning, including the arts, development of creativity, and aesthetic sensibilities. It is in dynamic interplay with the pedagogy of love, developing complex, agile thinking and discernment in young people—crucial in a

post-truth⁹ world. As Steiner states: ‘Let us strive after a real understanding of world evolution, let us seek after wisdom—and we shall find without fail that the child of wisdom will be love’ (Steiner, 1912).

Finally, the integration of the values of *love*, *life*, and *wisdom* needs to be enacted in relation to hope for the ecological future of our planet. This hope will be strengthened when we know, through education, a new generation of young people will be empowered through a pedagogy of *voice* (Haralambous, 2018). This pedagogical value supports the development of agency ‘through [a young person’s] deep understanding of the processes of *life*, their caring *love* of people, plants and animal life, and their *wise* understanding of the forces at work—both physical and subtle—in the world at large’ (Haralambous, 2018, p. 24, emphasis in the original). Steiner education continues to prioritise the human voice as a counter-balance to our increasingly technology-mediated society. Voice is strengthened through the narrative-based curriculum, music, rich dialogue, and encouraging reflective views within a curriculum that values diversity and inclusion.

Drawing Together Some Threads: Research and Reflection

Research on young people’s views and visions of their future demonstrate that holistic, artistic, imaginative, and proactive educational input, such as provided by Steiner education, can empower young people to create the futures they desire (Gidley, 2010). This is not a fait accompli future already committed through the past as noted above (Stetsenko, 2020). Crucially, research found that Steiner education enabled in young people critical, decolonising perspectives to global issues and the *agency* to make a difference (Gidley, 2016).

Similarly, Rawson (2017) showed that young people in Steiner schools in Germany can identify what has enabled them to construct clear identities. Steiner graduates also showed the qualities of agency, reflection, narrative empathy, biographical learning that exemplify the notion of subjectification or being called into being through encountering the ‘other’ (Biesta, 2020). As noted above, outcomes are not certain, but teachers can create conditions in which they are more likely to occur. It takes a teacher’s deep reflection on practice to identify what enables and what constrains the ‘coming into being’ of the young person/subject (Rawson, 2017).

A large study of Steiner graduates in the United States (Safit & Gerwin, 2019) has shown that graduates perceive Waldorf education has prepared them for life in an increasingly uncertain future; has instilled capacities of collaboration, creative and critical thinking; and has engendered a sense of obligation to community, the environment, and social justice matters. Researchers found a decoupling of the concept of success from economic gain.

⁹ According to the 2016 Word of the Year Oxford English Dictionaries entry: post-truth is the public burial of “objective facts” by an avalanche of media “appeals to emotion and personal belief”.

A key contribution of Steiner education is its conscious scaffolding of different teaching strategies across the three main stages of schooling to develop a capacity for agency. In the early years, the foundations of moral growth and agency are developed through the children's experience of *goodness* in the world around them; in the primary years, the principle of *beauty* informs teaching methods that guide students towards ethical awareness through the development of aesthetic sensibilities and deep engagement; in high school, teachers are guided by the principle of *truth* in developing multifaceted and ethically tested understandings which underpin moral judgement and discernment. From here young people have the capability for purposeful *action*.

Ashley (2005) surmises from a research study on Steiner education in England that it is Steiner's unique view of child development that lays at the base of young peoples' positive visions for preferred futures. Steiner education might stand alone in its view that children should not be burdened with potential 'adult' worries about the future of the planet, since Steiner education aims to develop confident, free adults through *conserving* childhood (Ashley, 2005). Instead, it is the focus on the development of aesthetic sensibilities in the primary school years that builds later capacities of rational mature judgement. In Steiner's developmental view, the aesthetic stage of the 7–14 years is not a 'less developed' version of the cognitive-rational phase of the 14–21 years. Later forms of rational thought do not displace aesthetic thought but complement it.

The implications of this for sustainability are considerable, for if a childish wonder about the natural world and the place of human beings within it remains into adulthood, it will act as a counterforce to the adult world weariness and the pursuit of happiness through material wealth that stifles action, entrenches social disadvantage, and the continuing degradation of the environment (Ashley, 2005).

In my autoethnographic research, as previously noted, I found that doubt and uncertainty about leadership and the way Steiner schools organise themselves, constrain the powerful underpinning pedagogy of such a dynamic education. The following section tells the story of the promise of leading for love, life, wisdom, and voice in amongst such doubt and uncertainty. It is an important story to tell, as together we confront the reality that our current educational model, including the way we work, is failing to meet the great global challenges of our time.

Leading for Love, Life, Wisdom, and Voice: A Story of Promise, a Story of Doubt, and Uncertainty

My autoethnographic enquiry involved telling the story of three significant 'border crossing' events during my time as a principal in a Steiner school in Australia: namely, a crisis in administration; open questioning of the role of principal through a process of arriving at inclusive decision-making; and issues associated with transforming pedagogical practice within a complex alternative educational philosophy.

In 2013/2014 there was a perfect storm brewing: an expansion of the school about to go very wrong; a job share crisis just about to hit; a left field enrolment crisis; and an impending administration restructure review which nearly brought the school to its knees. Issues around having a principal in a Steiner school surfaced within this perfect storm. Teachers saw my role changing over time without their consultation.

Within practice histories noted previously, undercurrents of doubt about the principalship simmered, but as so many things were going right at the school (from 2007 to 2014)—especially our collective research on pedagogical practices as described above—the simmering heat of doubt was bearable to all, including me. Mistrust by teachers of having a principal role in the school inevitably surfaced through the critical incidents which emerged during 2013. A key issue penetrating all areas of school life was how decisions were made in the school, particularly including land purchase, whether to double stream¹⁰ the school, job shares, and enrolments. Although there was less contestation in pedagogical decision-making as such, the impact of confused expectations, power, and control in the broad areas of school life on teachers' pedagogical practices, was profound. The stresses reached into classrooms, relationships with parents and between staff members.

Despite my desire to collaborate, there were significant constraints in reaching the high cultural expectation of inclusive decision-making practices in the school. In the context of the cultural-discursive arrangements, I was increasingly immersed in and subject to the discourse of accountability, compliance, standards, and expectations of positional leaders improving the school's performance as part of broader system demands. Enabling leading practices that develop inclusive decision-making must involve substantive and sustained critical discussion to strengthen the dialectical relationship between the 'differing imperatives of the formal positional leaders and informal leaders in a school' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 158). There was not enough time to do this on a practical level, however, and teachers felt shut out of the discourse which was so foreign to their own lived experiences in the classroom as Steiner educators.

In addition to time, other constraining material-economic arrangements (in physical time-space) included the incongruity between the hierarchical management structure and the pedagogical collaboration and joint decision-making expectations of senior teachers and administration staff alike. The procedures, rule-following, paperwork, and compliance within a system framework (Habermas & McCarthy, 1985) to do with, for example, redundancy, render the individual's everyday lived experience invisible. Not only is the individual worker subjected to the redundancy, but all the individuals involved are affected, as the compliance practices associated with the redundancy are significantly constrained and cut across the very legacies of Steiner education itself.

Conflicting and contested understandings were significant constraints in the social-political arrangements (in social space). There were conflicting and contested understandings about the role of a principal in a Steiner school, of the underlying educational philosophy, and of the college of teachers, leading to the formation of

¹⁰ Expand the school from one class per year level to two classes per year level.

subcultures in the social-political arrangements of the school, which operated in silence. What was not said publicly was more powerful than what was said. The series of disruptive events that led up to a major staffing crisis occurred within these trust-eroding undercurrents of split rather than shared narratives and understandings.

It is hard to locate the possibilities of leading for love, life, wisdom, and voice within these overwhelming constraints living in the spaces between what we did, what we said and how we related and where we had such high ideals for social renewal. Beyond the trauma of the critical events, however, and after a sustained period of ‘sitting in the fire’ (Mindell, 1995), an unexpected way forward emerged. This was an outcome of a whole community meeting facilitated by a trusted external consultant. What emerged, as we participated in this enabling space, was a collective will to reflect on practices of decision-making within our own practice traditions and practice landscape (Edwards-Groves & Ronnerman, 2013).

The next section discusses conditions of possibility that grew from this small, unexpected seed for renewal for reimagining decision-making, enabling new ways of working towards individual and collective renewal.

Conditions of Possibility

The potential of sustained, confronting critical reflection on leading practices as a Steiner School principal, which was the focus of my autoethnographical doctoral research, continues to astound me in its ongoing transformative power. Through the power of this lived experience perspective, I discovered the very nature of education itself, and leading practices which enable and constrain the courageous educational transformations necessary to respond to the question of what sort of world we want for our children and grandchildren.

What I found was change starts with self. Above all, self-transformation comes before a leader can transform a community. For me, this move towards a capable praxis-led leadership involved the resilience to, and tolerance of, not knowing, and a willingness to take time to sit in the fire of doubt, uncertainty, vulnerability, and ambiguity. This was beyond the allure of ‘fixing’, and enabled more complex and nuanced ways of making meaning to emerge. The philosophical underpinning of the education, with its constant threat of dogmatism coexisting with its promise, and potential of creative and practical renewal for individuals and society—was both a significant constraint and an enabler for me moving through and out of the fire. As an enabler, the value placed on meeting together in Steiner schools meant I and teachers were prepared to make time, space, and resourcing for meeting together on topics of profound difficulty, bringing historical doubt and uncertainty about positional leadership to the surface.

The key enabler was reimagining time itself. The amount of dialogue that was needed to affect a deeper understanding of each other’s point of view was astounding, as evidenced in the one and a half years it took to arrive at mutual understandings and consensus about how to go about making wise and ethical decisions in the

school. Through this dialogue, collective leadership capacity emerged and, along with this, agency, including my own agency as principal with positional authority. This involved my growing sense of inner personal power and identity as well as an authentic use of positional power. Reclaiming and then balancing positional authority with shared/collective responsibility was at the core of emergent decision-making protocols involving shared understandings of consensus (collective decision-making), consultation, collaboration, and agreement on who makes final decisions. Within a communicative space (Habermas & McCarthy, 1985) we were individually and collectively recasting an understanding of decision-making itself.

Another key breakthrough I had was that capable, praxis-led leading practices involve intentional hierarchy (Woods & Roberts, 2018) and healthy collaboration (Gidley, 2013). This way of working is not only possible within the Steiner context but also crucial in creating the possibility for the educational, social, and sustainability ideals of Steiner education given the right conditions. These right conditions involved understanding that collaborative leadership is enacted by everyone and works for inclusive participation and holistic learning for human growth (Woods & Roberts, 2018). Such learning enables adults to flourish and young people to develop towards healthy, creative purposeful adults. Leadership is a characteristic of the organisation as a whole—not just the actions of those labelled ‘leaders’. Whatever we may think, the reality is that leadership is the outcome of people’s actions and intentions. The power of positional leaders is mediated by what people do, or do not do (Woods & Roberts, 2018).

Acting on that understanding involved several material-economic arrangements I orchestrated, either consciously or as part of emerging complexities of events as they unfolded, which facilitated transformative processes in decision-making. The engagement of the school chaplain in our ongoing issues around decision-making was pivotal in building collective trust and helping the emergence of fledgling, tentative practices towards wise and inclusive decision-making. Other moves, apart from allowing extensive amounts of time for meeting together, were: the choice of a decision-making advisory group from a wide factional base to promote diversity of views; disbanding the existing leadership team; and providing significant teacher release time to allow leading practices to emerge and disperse throughout the school. The re-formation of the college of teachers with a clear role description was a key, if not the key, enabler to rebuild trust and develop common understandings.

What emerged was a move beyond structure, beyond ‘what ought to be’ in a Steiner school, towards a living and dynamic way of working with ‘what is’, based on both intention and emergence (Woods & Roberts, 2018). This emergent gesture belies the simplistic critique of those who would eschew all notions of hierarchy, due to fears of too much power being placed in the hands of those in formal leadership roles. The dualistic view of non-hierarchy versus hierarchy underplays the ‘complex, contested and fluid nature of power’ (Lumby, 2017, p. 4). Along with systemic and persistent doubt about leadership and management, it is a key factor holding back the Steiner movement.

Ultimately, out of the ashes emerged a lemniscate image of how we shape and are shaped by each other, which resonates strongly with the underlying philosophical picture of Steiner's social forms of the future where we are conscious of our individual and collective co-evolution (Gidley, 2016). I presented this lemniscate image at a staff meeting towards the end of 2016, where I announced the new interim leadership team arrangements for 2017. At this point, I saw glimpses of how leading practices for decision-making could emerge from both an intentional hierarchy and a healthy collaboration. In particular, the lemniscate gets to the heart of the relationship between the college of teachers and the principal.

I drew the lemniscate and explained my role as a first amongst equals—no one person is more important than another—and how our way of working together has emerged over time. We have been shaped by and are shaping each other's actions, our sayings, and our doings. In the lemniscate lived the intersection of lifeworld and systems—the 'semantic spaces, the locations in space and time and the social spaces in which we encounter one another as thinking and acting beings' (Kemmis et al., 2014, p. 165). This intersubjective space lies beyond structures and discussion about which consumes so much energy in Steiner schools (Fig. 5.1).

Leading practices of principals and teachers in the Steiner context need to involve a deliberate orchestration and scrutiny of these competing tensions of lifeworld and system to 'speak back' to the prevailing instrumental worldview, maintain the integrity of the education and, at the same time, promote its growth and renewal—in effect, bringing education to life. These shared understandings enable us to base decisions on the broader purpose of education rather than in reaction to increased accountabilities and compliance requirements.

Endnote

Steiner education has much to offer in breaking free from a rational, materialist understanding of the human being, nature, and society (Dahlin, 2021) to inform an education for renewal. Never has this offering as part of a broader educational dialogue been more important as we have handed young people a world legacy like no other, ensuring their lives are *qualitatively* different to previous generations. Underpinning this legacy is a crisis of meaning making and thinking itself. We are surely required as a matter of urgency to drastically reform our thinking as educators if we believe that education can also *shape* the transformation of these conditions. This is through equipping young people with the mature reasoning skills, the wisdom, the imagination, and the agency/voice to realise a future they believe they themselves can create.

In this chapter, I have explored whether Steiner schools can sustain high ideals of individual and social renewal through an education for love, life, wisdom, and voice and have suggested this rests on breaking through unsustainable contradictions in the way we work. These include doubt and uncertainty about the way we work, including the practice of leadership; intensification of principal's work and the depth of the

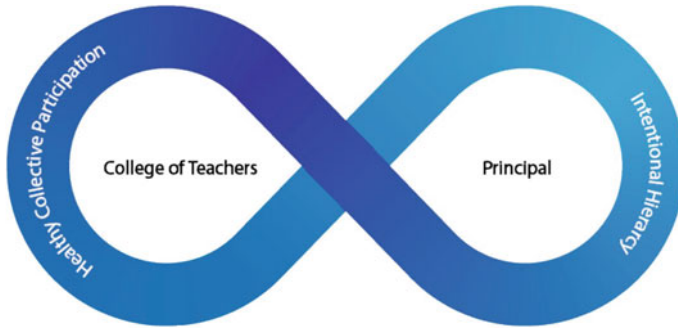


Fig. 5.1 The college of teachers and principal: a ‘reciprocal learning relationship’ (term from Woods & Roberts, 2018)

emotional load of the principal and teachers in holding the competing ideological and pedagogical tensions of the Steiner and broader educational policy environment.

In new contexts, such as my present role as CEO of Steiner Education Australia, I continue to grapple with positioning the humanistic, ecological values of Steiner education and pedagogy at a whole systems level within the contemporary ‘technical-rational view of development, learning and education’ (Tjarnstig & Mansikka, 2021, p. 61). In a parallel between my personal journey and that of the Steiner community, however, I increasingly see the core healing for the Steiner movement as crafting a persuasive narrative that is evidence informed of the work—including the *way* we work—and impact of Steiner schooling (Eacott, 2021). It is not a matter of being calm and accepting the position on the margins, nor is it a ‘call to arms’ to enter into strident politicisation, which can promote dogmatism and restrictive positioning (Walby, 2007). From a Habermasian perspective (Habermas & McCarthy, 1985), therefore, the most effective way Steiner education can have an influence is through indirect means, through dialogue in communicative space—not from an alternative stance but as a legitimate part of a diverse educational mainstream. In the lifeworld space of human communication and interaction, where breaking down of boundaries facilitates transformation for all, where we arrive at a mutual understanding of each other’s point of view, Steiner education has a voice. This chapter has entered that dialogic space and calls for more lived experience accounts of leading practices, of pedagogical practices, which provide the kind and degree of evidence that invites deeper conversations on urgent matters of our time.

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